

Is A Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Right for You?

Many of today's consumers want to re-establish the connections between consumers and the farmers who produce their food. Some of these consumers value the freshness of locally produced foods. Others want to support the local farm economy. Still others are looking for foods that do not ship well and therefore usually cannot be found in traditional commercial outlets.

Whatever the motivation, the growing public interest in high-quality, locally grown and produced food provides opportunities for small farmers who are willing to offer products that meet with the consumers' approval. CSA is one growing trend for connecting farmers and consumers. In these farmer-consumer alliances, the consumer members pay up-front for the food the farmer produces, share with the farmer the risks of farming, and also share in the bounty of the harvest.

Since CSA started to gain popularity in the United States in the 1980s, the number of farms supported directly by consumers has grown to more than 1,000. Today institutional CSAs, which supply fresh, nutritious, locally farm-grown foods to local schools, hospitals, and other institutions, reflect an outgrowth and the new leading edge of the CSA movement in the United States.

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A CSA member picks up her produce from farmer Rose Koenig, owner of the Plowshares CSA in Gainesville, FL. PHOTO BY: THOMAS WRIGHT, SENIOR INFORMATION SPECIALIST, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA'S INSTITUTE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES.

YOUR SMALL FARM NEIGHBOR Elizabeth Henderson Newark, New York

Elizabeth Henderson, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) pioneer, was one of the first USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program's farmer educators in the Northeast during 2002.

Henderson has influenced many farmers and local, state, and national policymakers through her conference appearances, grassroots organizing, and advocacy work. She has co-authored several books on sustainable farming practices and Community Supported Agriculture, including *A Manual on Whole Farm Planning: Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community Supported Agriculture*; *The Real Dirt: Farmers*

Tell About Organic and Low-Input Practices in the Northeast; and A Food Book for a Sustainable Harvest.

Henderson has been farming vegetables organically for more than 23 years and is a CSA operator in New York. She works actively to increase the dialogue between organic and conventional farmers, serves on the governing council of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, and co-chairs the Organic Committee of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture.

"As a market gardener 16 years ago," says Henderson, "I could see that organic farmers would not have the same economic base as other farmers in the Northeast. To survive, we had to sell directly to people. Since our farm is not on a beaten path, a stand or selling at farmers markets was not an option."

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The community food security movement is also a growing phenomenon. Municipal food councils are working with family farms, food banks, churches, nutrition programs, and other institutions to respond to complex issues of food and hunger in local communities.

Our guest feature article contributors are Dr. Mickie E. Swisher, one of Florida's state small farm program coordinators and director of the Center for Organic Agriculture at the University of Florida; Jennifer Gove, graduate assistant in the University's Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; and Rose Koenig, organic farmer, owner of a Community Supported Agriculture business and co-director of the Center for Organic Agriculture at the University of Florida.

What Is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

According to the USDA, a CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or through a shared vision, the community's farm. The growers and consumers provide mutual support and share the risks and benefits of food production.

The basic concept is for the consumers to provide direct, upfront support to a grower, who in turn does his or her best to provide a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet the consumers' needs and expectations. USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) defines CSA as "a more organized and defined form of subscription marketing in which consumer-members invest in the farm operation by paying up-front for the harvest. They share in many of the risks of crop failure, but also share the bounty in a good year."

Different From Subscription Farming. CSAs are different from subscription farms, which ask their consumers to pay for their produce up-front before it is harvested and delivered. In subscription farming, the producer owes the consumer for what he or she has paid for.

For example, if the consumer pays for 1 month of produce, the producer owes the consumer 1 month's worth of produce. If a freeze occurs and the producer can only supply the consumer with 3 weeks' worth of produce, the producer still owes the consumer 1 week's worth of produce.

This is different from a CSA in which the consumer takes a gamble when purchasing a share. If the same freeze affects a CSA, the consumer in the CSA accepts the reduced food supply.

CSA Types. There are three different types of CSAs.

- The first type includes a farmer who owns all of the land and equipment. The farmer does all or most of the work, and members provide capital by buying a share.
- The second type includes a farmer who owns the land and equipment, and the members provide capital and are an important part of the labor force.
- The third type of CSA does not include a farmer. The land and equipment are owned by the CSA, and the members are responsible for doing the work on the farm.

Why Do Consumers Join CSAs? There are many reasons consumers join CSAs. One is that the consumer is able to get non-shipped produce. The produce is grown locally, reducing the price and possible damage of shipping. Since the produce is grown locally, the money paid for the pro-

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duce is invested in locally owned and operated farms.

Another reason to join a CSA is that a consumer is able to get items that are rarely or never available in the supermarket. Consumers join CSAs to support local farmers; have access to fresh, high-quality produce; obtain organic or pesticide-free produce; benefit from more economical food than that purchased in a supermarket; and increase participation in community and environmental awareness. Not only does a CSA decrease costs for its members, but it also gives consumers an inside view about the food-growing process.

Forming a CSA. Converting to a CSA is easiest for farmers who own a piece of land and some equipment, have a few years of experience growing vegetables for market, and have established a customer following. Obstacles multiply for those farmers without land and would-be farmers without the experience of growing for market. Yet, around the country, many people have found ways to get started once they make up their minds to do so.

There is no recipe for setting up a CSA. However, there are three steps that are critical for success.

1. Initial organization of the group

No single person can create a successful CSA. Identifying a small group of individuals who will take responsibility for setting up the CSA is critical.

2. Structure and responsibilities

The organizing group must have a clear understanding of the responsibilities and obligations of all members. In most CSAs, the farmer prefers to make daily decisions. Members must agree about many other factors involved in the CSA. For example, who will decide what to raise, how

much food will each member receive, and who will have the responsibility of delivering food to members? Without a good division of labor and responsibility, disagreements grow and the CSA becomes one more complication for both the farmer and consumers.

3. Recruiting members

Successful CSAs generally begin small. Like any other organization, a CSA encounters initial problems and obstacles. Resolving them is much easier when the group is small. Initial recruitment is almost always by personal contact. Social clubs, the workplace, and churches have all served as centers for organizing CSAs. Over time, a CSA grows naturally if the quantity and quality of food meets its members' needs.

Core Group. The grower-member council that works together to run the CSA is called the core group. It is responsible for determining the duties, activities, and functions of the group. Responsibilities of the core group often include:

- determining what crops will be grown;
- determining what the fees will be, for who and when they will be due;
- selecting farmers;
- selecting land to use for farming;
- assigning duties to members when and if needed;
- determining the distribution process.

Organizing a Core Group. Different roles for core group members are possible. The membership coordinator ensures contact between the farmer and members, collects all correspondence and fees, and deals with membership concerns and problems.

The treasurer receives fees from the membership coordinator and keeps the payment schedule, deposits fees, writes checks to the farmer, does bookkeeping, and maintains the bank account.

Additional core group jobs include:

- The communication coordinator who writes, copies, and distributes newsletters and notices, and maintains the membership list and addresses.
- The volunteer coordinator who helps coordinate volunteer days, maintains the volunteer list, and calls volunteers for market assistance.
- The social director who organizes social activities, coordinates volunteers for activities, and works with the farmer for on-farm events.
- The needy family coordinator who identifies families for free shares, contacts these families for the farmer, and ensures that food gets delivered to these families.

Calculating the Cost of a Share.

The calculated cost of a share is based on many factors, including value based on farm budget, retail market, average weight of produce, unit pricing, and the sliding scale options for low-income families.

What Should CSAs Offer? CSAs should offer education to consumers about seasonal variations in their state (for example, winter squash in April in Florida) and should focus on common vegetables with a good variety and fresh, high quality.

You will never find two CSAs that are alike. Most CSAs provide produce, but they also can and often do provide other commodities, such as cut flowers, plants, and such animal products as honey, eggs, and meat.

CSAs offer not only food, but an unforgettable experience. Valerie Engelman, the Terraforma Farm CSA Coordinator, states that “For city dwellers, a CSA provides a connection with nature and a convenient, safe, and reliable source of healthy, high-quality vegetables.” She also says that “CSAs teach members an understanding of farming.”

Surveying Members. Surveying members includes having a rating system in the brochure, communicating, listening, and observing. Many CSAs survey during the growing season and at the end. Surveying can provide members a chance to make their feelings known and indicate to a CSA what to produce, what they like about the CSA, and what needs to be changed.

Distribution System. Components of a distribution system include determining hours and day(s) of pick-ups and establishing the best pick-up sites. Pick-up sites may include the farm, a farmers market, and central sites such as cooperatives, health stores, and members’ homes. Home delivery and mail delivery are other options.

Henderson and Van En recommend having members pick up their produce at the farm. If the farmers want to provide convenience to their members, they can have the member pick up their produce from a local distribution point, such as a farmers market or farm stand.

Are Working Shares Right for Your Farm? To determine if working shares are right for your farm, you should answer a few questions: How do they work? How many hours for how much food? You will need to develop farm policies and liability

issues in order to make this a successful program. Members and volunteers should be made aware of these policies from the beginning to prevent any misunderstandings.

Marketing Your CSA. When recruiting members, a CSA will need to know how much food each family will be receiving, make it convenient to join, understand and explain the seasonal aspect of local food, and explain that CSA membership—unlike supermarket shopping—is a commitment.

A CSA will also need to determine how and when to advertise and determine the advantages and disadvantages of free versus paid advertising, special interest news stories, web sites, church groups, schools, environmental organizations, and word of mouth.

A CSA must keep membership records to predict the percent that will likely drop out each year, call members who drop out and ask why, and survey members at the end of the season to gauge satisfaction.

Ways to increase member retention include:

- providing excellent service and quality,
- providing convenient pick-up sites with flexible hours,
- encouraging sharing,
- engaging members in on-farm activities, and
- making members feel they are important.

Legalities. Henderson and Van En have pointed out legalities involved with a CSA:

- “Most CSAs carry standard liability insurance. As separate coverage, liability can be very expensive; as

part of a farm insurance package, the price is more reasonable.

- You should try to get a liability policy that includes a stated level of medical expenses paid out without a lawsuit. Some CSAs have additional liability as a special form of “pick-your-own.” The rates for “pick-your-own” will be lower if you specify that you do not use synthetic pesticides and that members do not use equipment, horses, or ladders. Pick-your-own coverage will allow members to help harvest and to use hand tools. Keep a first-aid kit handy.
- A CSA can adopt a variety of legal structures. Each group should determine which form is most appropriate. Some CSAs are sole proprietorships or partnerships; in other words, both the farm and the CSA business are the property of the farmers.
- Other CSAs separate the CSA from the ownership of the land. The land may be held as a sole proprietorship, a partnership, or a corporation, while the CSA is an unincorporated associate or is incorporated as a non-profit corporation.
- Groups of farmers can organize as farmer-owned cooperatives, most of which are corporations. There is no set structure in the law for food co-ops or buying clubs, so groups of consumers can change the corporate structure that suits them best in forming a CSA.
- Institutional CSAs usually hold both the land and the CSA as part of a non-profit corporation. Each form has advantages and disadvantages. The details of these legalities will vary from state to state.

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Groh, T., & McFadden, S. **Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms, Farm Supported Communities.** Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association. 1997.

Henderson, E., & Van En, R. **Sharing the Harvest: A Guide to Community Supported Agriculture.** White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company. 1999.

Sustainable Agriculture Network, U.S. Department of Agriculture. **Marketing Strategies for Farmers and Ranchers.** SAN Publication No. 11/99, Washington, DC. 1999.



"Elizabeth Henderson, a Community Supported Agriculture pioneer." PHOTO BY NANCY KASPER.

NEIGHBOR...CONTINUED FROM PG. 1

"The CSA is a good way to market directly to customers. I feel that I know the nicest people in the city of Rochester, where most of our CSA members live. Our members do not just help me market my vegetables. We are building something different together—an extension of the farm family."

Born in New York City with no previous farming or gardening experience, Henderson was once a university teacher. She took up farming about 1978 on an older farm in Gill, MA, after her husband died. She began producing and selling enough vegetables to cover basic expenses and start a new life with her son.

Henderson's values include building intentional communities, organic farming, and Community Supported Agriculture as fuller ways of creating world peace through a chosen way of life. Her reverence for the environment, life, cooperation, justice, and beauty is embodied in her living CSA organization.

She participated in a study circle with experienced organic farmers, which led to founding the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Massachusetts. In 1988, she moved to New York to farm as a partner at Rose Valley Farm – a diversified, organic operation. She has been producing organically grown vegetables for the fresh market since then.

She joined with Alison Clarke of the nonprofit Politics of Food to form the Genesee Valley Organic CSA in 1989. There were 29 members in the CSA's first growing season. Most of its produce was sold to food co-ops and other markets. The CSA membership grew from 45 to 130.

Henderson and two new farm partners moved to rented land at Crowfield Farm in 1998 and built their current 15-acre farm, Peacework Organic Farm. Two-hundred and fifty members near Rochester, NY, now receive a share of the farm's crops through her CSA, one of the oldest in the country, now in its 16th year.

Henderson values the relationships that the CSA environment builds between farmers and the people who eat the food they produce and the connections between the farmer, community, and the land.

Members must take responsibility for their own food by working on the farm. They can volunteer to be in a core group that administers the project, oversee food distribution in the nearby city of Rochester, or help raise the 70 different crops grown on the certified organic farm.

"The diversity of vegetables grown," explains Henderson, "plays an important role in our type of crop insurance for no matter what the weather presents, some crops flourish."

Carrots, potatoes, broccoli, tomatoes, peppers, beans, eggplants, and lettuce are among the most popular vegetables raised, along with bok choy, shungiku, tatsoi, komatsuna, and herbs like cilantro, dill, thyme, lemon-balm, tarragon, purple and spicy bush basil. Melons, small fruit and flowers are also raised. Ninety-five percent of the harvest goes into the CSA operation.

Doctors and busy parents are among the CSA's diverse membership. A sliding scale for membership fees ensures that the CSA farm is accessible to people of all income levels. All share a concern about getting fresh, nutritious locally grown food," says Henderson. "Taking responsibility for growing their own food is a way of getting members excited about creating a new institution and building a sustainable community."

"Farmers need to ask more of the people who get their food to share the farmer's risk and work," she says, "as well as enjoy the benefits of time spent in a pristine rural setting and see their food grow from seedling to final harvest."

The CSA includes a coop intern program, which advertised for two interns for the 2004 season to learn all farm skills and share in projects. Through the intern program, Hen-

derson hopes to identify someone committed to farming in the future who will stay on and become a fourth farm partner. Elizabeth Henderson can be contacted at 2218 Welcher Rd.,

Newark, NY 14513, Tel 315-331-9029; e-mail: ehendrsn@redsuspenders.com.

The CSA's Web site is
<http://www.gvocsa.org>.

SELECTED COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/>
"Community Supported Agriculture: Resources for Farmers or Producers," from the USDA, National Agricultural Library's Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, offers a wealth of information relating to Community Supported Agriculture. E-mail to: afsic@nal.usda.gov. Phone 301-504-6559.

<http://www.attra.org/>
The Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) is a partnership between USDA's Rural Business-Cooperative Service and the non-profit organization, the National Center for Appropriate Technology. It offers sustainable agriculture and organic farming news, events, funding opportunities, and publications on production practices, crop and livestock enterprises, innovative marketing, and organic certification, and local, regional, USDA, and other federal sustainable agriculture activities. The site includes extensive CSA information and the services of sustainable agriculture experts to discuss farming operation questions

with farmers, ranchers, market gardeners, extension agents, researchers, educators, farm organizations, and others involved in commercial agriculture, especially those in traditionally underserved communities. Call the toll-free help lines at 800-346-9140 (English) or 800-411-3222 (Spanish).

<http://www.biodynamics.com/csa.html>
The Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, a non-profit association supportive of Community Supported Agriculture since the first CSA projects were begun in the 1980s, lists on its Web site books about CSAs, a database of more than 500 North American CSAs, biodynamic farms and gardens and information on community funding of CSAs. Consumers can call toll free to 800-516-7797 to request a free listing of CSA and biodynamic farms and gardens in their state. The association also acts as a clearinghouse for individuals seeking information about training, apprenticeship, or employment at CSA gardens throughout North America. Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Inc., 25844 Butler Road, Junction City, OR 97448. E-mail: biodynamic@aol.com.

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>
The Community Food Security Coali-

tion, a non-profit organization dedicated to building strong, sustainable, local and regional food systems that ensure access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all people, offers on its Web site programs, events, links, and publications. Community Food Security Coalition, P.O. Box 209, Venice, CA 90294. Phone; 310-822-5410 or fax 310-822-1440.

<http://www.csacenter.org>
The Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources at Wilson College offers books, articles, periodicals, listservs, and videocassettes about Community Supported Agriculture. Enter your state on its Web site to find a CSA in your area, or phone 717-264-4141 or e-mail to info@csacenter.org

<http://www.sare.org/csa/>
The Sustainable Agriculture Network – a collaboration among USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program in the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, the Alternative Farming Systems Information Center at USDA's National Agricultural Library, and many nonprofit organizations – makes available on this Web site a list of CSA operations in almost every state.

A wide range of resources is available to assist small farmers and ranchers and their communities. Readers wishing further information about the resources listed below are asked to contact the individuals or offices listed for each item.



PRINT MEDIA

Farms of Tomorrow-Revisited. By Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden. Explains the basics about CSAs and offers an in-depth look at several biodynamic farms. Cost: \$12.50. To order, call 888-516-7797 or 541-998-0105, or write Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 25844 Butler Road, Junction City, OR 97448, or e-mail biodynamic@aol.com

Micro Eco-Farming: Prospering From Backyard to Small-Acreage in Partnership With the Earth. By Barbara Berst Adams. This book describes the emergence of "microfarms" on tiny acreages that offer full-time incomes by growing tasty organic products

A number of grant, loan, and training programs are available to support small farmers and their communities. Examples of such programs are summarized below. Readers wishing additional information are asked to contact the individuals or offices listed for each item.



GRANTS, LOANS, TRAINING

USDA's Community Food Project Competitive Grant Program funds low-income communities to increase their food self-reliance and promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues. Small farms have participated in funded projects in a variety of ways. The next competition opened January 2005, and closes April



with sustainable methods. Many microfarm examples describe farmers who are succeeding, what you can grow, what farming methods you can use, animals you can choose, how farmers reach their niche markets in creative, new ways, and resources. Cost: \$16.95 plus \$4 shipping. To order, phone 888-281-5170 or write New World Publishing, 11543 Quartz Dr., #1, Auburn, CA 95602.

Sell What You Sow! The Growers Guide to Successful Product Marketing by Eric Gibson. This book offers farmers and market growers practical guidance for high-value market-

ing of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Topics include marketing plans and strategies, crop selection, processed products, regulations, insurance, promotion, and advertising. Cost: \$26.50. Send to: New World Publishing, 11543 Quartz Dr., #1, Auburn, CA 95602, or call 530-823-3886.

Selling Produce to Restaurants:

A Marketing Guide for Small Acreage Growers. Author Diane Green, an organic farmer and CSA producer, shares insights and solutions developed at her organic farm in 10 years of selling produce to local restaurants in rural Idaho. Her principles of working with restaurants, selecting produce, pricing, identifying market opportunities, and operating a market garden are basic to any locale. Cost: \$10 plus \$2.50 shipping. To order, contact Greentree Naturals via e-mail at greentree@coldreams.com or on their Web site: www.greentreenaturals.com. 20th Annual North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show

2005. See the Web site for more information: http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in_focus/hunger_if_competitive.htm



VIDEO

Farmers and Their Diversified Horticultural Marketing Strategies. This education video by vegetable and berry specialist, Vern Grubinger, University of Vermont Extension, shares the experience of eight farm managers who show how the right combination of products, customers, and marketing strategies can help build financially rewarding businesses. Cost: \$19 plus \$4.95 shipping, handling and sales tax. New York residents should add 8.25% sales tax. If ordering more than one copy or from outside the U.S., please contact the Northwest Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (NRAES) by phone at 607-255-7654, by fax at 607-254-8770, or by e-mail at nraes@cornell.edu. Visit the NRAES web site at www.nraes.org.

UPCOMING

EVENTS

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION	CONTACT
February 7-14	20th Annual North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show Boston, MA	Boston, MA	Contact: http://www.nafdma.com/Boston/ or call Boston Park Plaza Hotel at 888-625-5144.
March 20-26	19th Annual National Small Farm Week "Small Farms: It's A Growing Business" North Carolina A&T State University	Greensboro, NC	Contact: M. Ray McKinnie - 336-334-7691 or via email: mckinnie@ncat.edu
October 17-20	4th National Small Farm Conference, "Creating Opportunities for Small Farmers and Ranchers,"	Greensboro, NC	Contact: www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/ag_systems/in_focus/smallfarms_if_conferences.html Daniel Lyons, Sr. 336-334-7734 Roger Crickenberger 919-515-3252 Denis Ebodaghe 202-401-4385
November 3-5	13th Small Farm Conference and Trade Show	Columbia, MO	Contact: Ron Macher - 1-800-633-2535

See Small Farm website (www.reeusda.gov/smallfarm) for the most up-to-date listing of events. We welcome submissions of events from our subscribers that would be of interest to the small farm community so that our Upcoming Events listing reflects a diversity of events from all regions of the country. Please send

submissions to Stephanie Koziski, skoziski@csrees.usda.gov, Editor, *Small Farm Digest*, CSREES, USDA, Mail Stop 2220, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20250-2220 (phone: 202/401-6544; fax: 202/401-5179; e-mail: skoziski@csrees.usda.gov).

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